

## **UpGrade: Education Reform Act of 2005**

*“It is time to UpGrade Mississippi’s public education system for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. For years, Mississippi education debates have been only about funding and not fundamentals – with little improvement in results. It is time to refocus our efforts on what is really important to learning: the classroom.*

*Institutions from business to the military are dismantling ineffective bureaucracies and embracing new technology and creative thinking. It has been a generation since Mississippi last took a comprehensive look at its public schools.*

*It is time to up Mississippi’s grade in school comparisons with other states. It is time to UpGrade Mississippi’s approach to educating our children and preparing them for the world.*

*I am proposing several major education reforms to the people of Mississippi and to the Legislature after holding a series of meetings around the state.*

*First, and most importantly, I listened to the ideas, hopes, and concerns of more than 200 classroom teachers. The best way to learn how to improve classroom performance is to listen to the most integral part of our schools: the classroom teacher.*

*We must embrace lifelong learning in Mississippi; the idea that education begins in the early childhood, continues through high school, and beyond to community colleges, universities and adult workforce training. To help develop ways to increase access to quality early childhood education, I held an early childhood summit in Tupelo with child care providers, Head Start agencies, and pre-kindergarten teachers.*

*To learn more about positive education reforms around the nation, the National Governors Association held a conference at my request on teaching quality, recruitment, and retention on the Gulf Coast.*

*To bring all these ideas together, more than 700 business leaders, teachers, administrators, Legislators, and community leaders met in*

*Jackson for the Mississippi Education Summit which focused on the bedrock of our education system: K-12 public schools.*

*The proposals contained in UpGrade focus on the classroom while empowering local communities to make decisions affecting their schools. Local school leaders should be free to innovate and to make more efficient use of their resources, redirecting them to the classroom and helping teachers teach.”*

- Governor Haley Barbour

## **UpGrade: Teacher Support**

### **Pay for Performance**

We must reward our teachers with better pay. For the 2005-2006 school year, I support the final installment of the teacher pay raise package, an 8% across-the-board raise for our teachers.

Future pay raises should include financial rewards for performance. We should reward the hard work of our best teachers with more money. In my old business, no two people made the same amount of money. We used salaries to recruit and retain the best talent. We should do the same for our schools.

The Governor’s Teacher Advisory Council had some strong feelings about pay for performance. They brought up good points about making sure that any system must be fair, not subjective, and must take into account the teachers who do not teach traditional academic classes with a test at the end of the year to measure progress. I listened to them. Therefore, I propose a performance-based pay system similar to the one in North Carolina. If a school meets their expected rate of gain for student performance, every faculty member and administrator, from the math teacher to the librarian to the P.E. teacher, would get a bonus. This would encourage every one working in the school to pull in the same direction and to have a greater stake in ensuring that our students do better.

We should allow local school districts to pay teachers more if they teach subjects that are hard to staff, such as math and science. For example, in

recent years only one physics teacher has been certified by the Mississippi Department of Education. We will not be able to address the shortage of teachers in critical subject areas unless school districts are allowed to pay them more.

### **Recruiting and Retaining Teachers**

Our most experienced teachers are often the best at handling discipline problems and they are often the best teachers in the classroom. However, more than 3000 of Mississippi's most experienced teachers are eligible for retirement this year. Since our schools of education produce approximately 1500 teachers a year and less than 1000 are still teaching in Mississippi after three years, the looming retirement of a large number of teachers will exacerbate our teacher shortage. Recruiting and retaining quality teachers continues to be a significant hurdle for many of our schools. We must reform the pension law to encourage Mississippi's teachers to re-enter the public school classroom in critical shortage areas.

There are many other states which have unified state retirement systems structured similarly to ours. These states are allowing school districts to rehire retired teachers so they can have a high quality, experienced teacher in the classroom, as opposed to an unqualified substitute. We can do this without negatively affecting our state's retirement system.

If a school district has an opening in a critical needs subject area or are located in a geographically defined critical needs area, they should be allowed to rehire retired teachers. To prevent double-dipping, the rehired retired teachers would not receive any more creditable service time in the retirement system. This is a no-cost way to get more quality teachers into the classroom. Our retired teachers will be able to teach in a familiar environment without having to commute longer distances to another state or to a private school.

To get more new teachers into our schools, we must build on the reforms enacted in the 2004 Regular Session of the Legislature and in recent years. We must ensure that the focus of teacher certification is on substance, not process. Mississippi should be the first state in the nation to honor the federal government's commitment to quality teaching by recognizing – through full certification – all teachers from all states meeting this definition.

## ***Upgrade: Discipline***

The Governor's Teacher Advisory Council stressed the importance of classroom discipline. Many of them said that more teachers leave the profession because of discipline problems than they do because of pay. Even the most motivated student can not learn in an unruly environment.

Research shows that beginning teachers who are taught more about classroom management perform better and teach longer. Many of the teachers on the Advisory Council stressed the need for more mentoring. In addition to providing a new career ladder, giving a financial incentive to at least two experienced mentors in each of our middle schools, where discipline problems are the worst, will help teachers address the discipline problems which threaten our schools. This can be done at a very low cost and would be an efficient use of our resources.

Teachers are already defined as the classroom authority by current law. However, if a principal does not back up their decisions, that authority is meaningless. Texas recently adopted a law which strengthens the teacher's authority in the classroom and we should do the same in Mississippi. If a principal decides to send a disruptive student back to the classroom over the teacher's objections, a standing "Student Disciplinary Review Board" comprised of faculty members to review the case promptly. The decision of the board will be final.

Like almost every problem in our schools, discipline issues will not be solved without more parental involvement and responsibility. If a student consistently disrupts the school environment, parents and the child are often called in for a conference. We need to make this process timelier and increase the accountability of the parent if they don't make an effort to address the problem. If a parent willfully refuses to participate, this should be a misdemeanor, punishable by increased fines, community service, or mandated attendance with their child in the classroom.

Tragedies such as the ones in Pearl or Columbine in recent years must never be forgotten. The Mississippi School Safety Center is an existing entity with the mission of working with local law enforcement to develop school district safety programs designed to address local concerns. However, this integral mission has not been funded. By reorganizing the Mississippi School Safety

Center into regional entities administered by Educational Service Agencies, they will become eligible for federal funding, and I am committed to seeking that funding.

### ***UpGrade: Local Community Empowerment***

Every quality teacher deserves leadership in their school and school district that is innovative, imaginative, and supportive. Local school communities should be allowed to operate as 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations, free from unnecessary, obsolete or unduly burdensome state control and regulation which stifles creativity. This will vest them with an entrepreneurial spirit which sparks innovation, creativity and efficiency, with the goal of being the most efficient delivery of excellent educational services in America.

Many education reforms focus of consequences for failure. While I support the accountability contained in laws such as No Child Left Behind, we should also reward success and provide a positive incentive for the leadership of low performing schools to strive for higher levels of achievement.

Our highest performing schools, designated as level 4 or level 5, should be liberated from all the process standards required by the State Department of Education's policy manual, as long as they maintain their high level of achievement. While most of these schools will continue to perform the functions outlined in the policy manual, they will be free from the paperwork burden that comes with state department regulations.

For too long, school districts have been reticent to try new and innovative instructional strategies or business models because they operated under the assumption that unless the law expressly said they could, they couldn't. Operating under this approach discourages attempts to be resourceful and creative. To reward success, and to encourage innovation, the state should grant "Home Rule" to high-performing school districts (combined average ranking of all schools of at least Level 4), as long as they maintain their high level of achievement. This would allow these districts to be legally able to pursue their own education interests, unless the law expressly prohibits it.

Just as importantly, these liberation proposals will free time and resources of the State Department of Education so it can focus on increasing the achievement levels of lower-performing schools.

The liberation from process standards is easily defined, but there are many other process rules and requirements imbedded in state law and in the State Department of Education's policy manual from which high performing schools should be liberated. Therefore, I will create a task force of superintendents, principals, and teachers to review the entire Title 37 of the Mississippi Code and the State Department of Education's operating procedures to identify all the rules and requirements which are not related to testing and fiscal accountability. I envision using the results of this review to increase the amount of liberation successful schools can achieve.

Charter schools are an additional way in which local communities can be empowered. Charter schools exchange freedom from government regulations for increased accountability. By expanding the charter school law in Mississippi, which has been labeled the most restrictive in the nation, local communities will be free to develop schools of learning tailored to their own needs.

### ***UpGrade: High School***

To restore rigor and relevance to the high school experience, and to help address a drop-out rate, which approaches 50% by conservative estimates, we must redesign the Mississippi high school. In doing so, we recognize that good jobs require more skills and education. We need a single educational pipeline that gives students the common, high-skills required by colleges and employers today. This plan can help bridge the divide between secondary and postsecondary systems by calling for college-ready standards and courses for all high school students.

Every student who desires to do so should be able to earn a semester's worth of college credit in their senior year of high school, saving Mississippi's parents thousands of dollars in tuition, and increasing the academic rigor of the senior year for students. This is achievable by increasing the number of Mississippi students in dual enrollment programs and the number of students taking Advanced Placement exams.

Dual enrollment allows high school students to take classes at a community college or university while maintaining a high school curriculum. I support the efforts of the State Department of Education, the Board for Community and Junior Colleges, and the Institutions of Higher Learning to make dual enrollment more accessible. However, one essential component which is currently missing is that all coursework should be for dual credit, usable for both high school Carnegie units and post-secondary degree credit.

The Pre-Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT) is a nationally-recognized test used to measure students' ability to succeed in Advanced Placement classes. By the 2007-2008 school year, all public school 10th graders should have free access to taking the PSAT. The relatively small cost of administering this test statewide (\$250,000) is easily manageable.

By the 2007-2008 school year, all districts should offer their students the ability to take at least four Advanced Placement tests in the core subject areas of math, science, English, and social studies. To assist students in preparing for these tests, federal funding (Advanced Placement Incentive Grants) is available to train Advanced Placement teachers. An online AP classroom is already available to districts which cannot provide for an AP teacher to be physically present. It is estimated that it will cost less than \$1 million a year to help economically disadvantaged students pay for the cost of the AP tests, and federal funding is also available to help bear these costs.

Two-thirds of all new jobs created over the next decade will require some postsecondary education, but not necessarily a four-year degree. High school students should be able to begin work towards obtaining an industry-recognized certification while completing their high school coursework. To accomplish this we must modernize vocational education programs by maximizing the use of already available federal Workforce Investment Act youth training funds and federal Perkins Act funds.

We should encourage businesses in Mississippi to offer high school students at least a semester scholarship for industry specific training at community colleges during the fall or summer after their graduation in return for their promise (compact) to stay in school.

## ***Upgrade: Early Childhood Development***

Education must begin in early childhood. A child who is exposed to letters, words and conversations will be ready to learn and a child who is not will face a sometimes insurmountable obstacle early in life. While the best and most ideal place to receive this education is from parents who are aware of ways to foster a child's positive development, we must recognize that the ideal is not always attainable or practical.

According to National Institute for Early Education Research, approximately 56% of Mississippi's children aged three and four are enrolled in a pre-school or nursery school, which is one of the highest rates in the South. We can build on this high level to increase access to quality early childhood education programs by instituting policies to encourage child care providers to include educational content in their programs.

There are currently 15 agencies or councils in the state which have some level of responsibility for childcare or early childhood development. In an effort to better align state policy and streamline efforts, state entities that deal with early childhood education should be coordinated through the Advisory Board of the Interagency Council, which will be led by the Office of Children and Youth Services within the Department of Human Services.

Child care providers who receive state funding through the Department of Human Services from the Child Care Development Fund or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families should contain an education program to receive the maximum reimbursement for child care certificates.

A quality rating scale, based on an easy to understand star system, should immediately be implemented and posted at sponsored childcare centers. This rating system will be based on the child care center's level of education content and will provide parents with more information as they choose to which child care center to send their child. The Advisory Board of the Interagency Council will be the designated group for developing the appropriate curriculum framework.

To facilitate the implementation and monitoring of the reformed tiered reimbursement and quality rating system, the Department of Human Services should have the responsibility for child care licensing.



Even with these reforms to provide a quality early childhood development opportunity to the tens of thousands of three and four years olds who are in a nursery school or preschool, we must do more to help parents learn what they can do on their own to help their children. Over the decades, the Agriculture Extension Service has been invaluable in helping Mississippians learn how to use new knowledge to improve their agricultural skills. An important component for the success of the Agriculture Extension Service was that it did not attempt to do the job for an individual; rather the Extension Service taught them how to do it themselves. We can do the same for early childhood development. I will form a task force composed of the Department of Human Services, the Department of Education, Mississippi State University and others to study the utility of a statewide Education Extension Service which will foster early childhood development skills and knowledge.